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### Just-world victimology

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**Just-world victimology: revisiting Lerner in the study of victims of crime<sup>1</sup>**

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## Introduction

Good things happen to good people, bad things to bad people. You get what you deserve. From fairytales to religion, from Robin Hood to James Bond, this message is repetitively conveyed. The right side wins, even against all odds, and the wrongdoers do not get to profit from their ill-gotten gains. Crime does not pay, while hard work and cooperation do.

In a classic series of studies Melvin Lerner showed over three decades ago that this 'justice motive' is so engrained in people that they will adhere to it, even in the face of obviously conflicting evidence (e.g. Lerner and Simmons, 1966; Lerner and Miller, 1978; Lerner, 1980). In one of the most telling experiments, Lerner had two subjects work equally hard on a task, with their reward depending on a flip of the coin, one getting more, the other less. Observers who were aware of the manner of rewarding the workers, still overwhelmingly thought that the one who received the most, must have done the larger share. In Lerner's words, the justice motive is a fundamental delusion (Lerner, 1980). This fundamental delusion is of particular relevance in clear instances of injustice. Here the justice motive is threatened and much of Lerner's research and that of others concerning Just World theory has related to the strategies people employ to preserve their sense of a just world when faced with these situations.

Lerner's theory has played a role in the development of victimology (see Rock, 2007). It offered a particularly compelling theoretical explanation for the phenomenon of 'victim blaming'. Here the notion of good things happening to good people and bad things to bad people is reversed. The fact that something bad has happened to someone, implies that he or she must be a bad (or at least irresponsible) person. The tendency to blame victims for their own misfortune has henceforth been documented in a wide range of situations; from crime (even homicide and genocide) to sickness.

Lerner's notion of the importance of the belief in a just world was also an integral part of Janoff-Bulman's theory of 'shattered assumptions' (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Janoff-Bulman theorized that psychological complaints following victimization could be explained by the fact that experiencing crime severely jeopardizes victims' previously held convictions about the world being a just place. This diminishes victims' sense of control over and predictability of their environment. This shattering of assumptions is associated with the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder. Although there has been some discussion of the 'shattering' mechanism Janoff-Bulman assumed (e.g. Winkel, 2007), a diminished sense of control and the cognition that the world is an unjust, evil place both still are central elements of current theories of post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g. Ehlers and Clark, 2000).

It is important to note that the construct that Janoff-Bulman employed is slightly different from the justice motive that Lerner discerned (see Hafer and Begue, 2005). In the shattered assumptions theory, the belief in a just world is an individual difference measure which relates to the extent to

which a subject actually believes the world is a just place (see Rubin and Peplau, 1975; for a review Furnham, 2003). However as Hafer and Begue (2005) note ‘the essence of just-world theory is that most people have a “belief in a just world” in the sense that their underlying need to believe in a just world motivates them to behave as if they believed that the world is a just place and as if they wanted to preserve this belief, even if they do not explicitly endorse a belief in a just world on standard individual-difference scales’.<sup>2</sup>

Except for reference to Lerner in studies into victim blaming or corollaries like rape myth acceptance and in studies into the mechanisms of the development of PTSD, the implications of just world theory and the ongoing research into this construct have been largely neglected in victimology.<sup>3</sup> This is unfortunate, because although Lerner (2003) himself provocatively concluded that although psychologists may have found the justice motive, they had also lost it and where perhaps not likely to find it again<sup>4</sup>, the body of research into just world theory is relevant in many ways to the development of victimological theory.

This article is an attempt to make up some of the lost ground. First the current state of the just world theorizing will be discussed. In this overview particular attention will be paid to the various strategies that people employ in the face of injustice. This discussion will be followed by the application of just world theory to a number of issues that are relevant to the development of victimology. First Nils Christie (1986)’s description of the ideal victim and criminological notions surrounding it will be compared to just world theory. Is the ideal victim really ideal? Secondly the justice motive will be used to unravel a number of notions included in restorative justice theory. Thirdly I will discuss Van Dijk’s recent work on the notion of victim labelling (see Van Dijk 2006; 2008), as this proffers a different explanation for many of the victimological findings relating to just world theory. Finally the somewhat pessimistic implications of the justice motive for advancing the position of victims will be noted.

Throughout the article relevant victimological research will be used to demonstrate the use of just-world theory. In this process it will be shown that the research into the lived experience of victims is useful in the further development of just-world theory as well.

## **Just-world theory**

### *Some fundamental notions*

Hafer and Begue (2005) provide a comprehensive overview of the research into just-world theory. I

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<sup>2</sup> This is also the reason why Lerner, Hafer & Begue and others prefer to speak of the justice motive (see also Ross and Miller, 2002), rather than the need to believe in a just world. As Lerner pointed out the latter construct was a metaphor rather than an actual description of the justice motive (Lerner, 1997). In particular the term believe is problematic, as this refers to conscious thought, while the justice motive is often implicit in the behaviour of people.

<sup>3</sup> See f.e. the recent Handbook of Victims of Victimology, in which Lerner is referred to just once, see Walklate, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> The title of a 2003 article by Lerner in Personality and Social Psychology Review read “The Justice Motive. Where psychologists found it, how they lost it and why they might not find it again”.

will restrict myself mainly to their discussion of the strategies people employ when faced with injustice, to which I will add the ongoing research into retributive justice, but three other features of their overview merit mentioning as well.

In the first place Hafer and Begue (2005) remind us that the need to believe in a just world is often implicit (see also Lerner, 1980, 1998; Lerner and Goldberg, 1999).<sup>5</sup> People are mostly unaware that the justice motive underlies their behaviour (see also Dalbert, 2001), and therefore will not report it as a conscious motive (Lerner, 2003). This is an additional reason to discern research into the justice motive from research concerning individual differences in the belief in a just world. The latter reflects people's explicit or self-attributed motives and although these may be correlated with the justice motive, this is not necessarily the case. There may only be a loose correspondence between explicitly endorsing just world beliefs and the role the justice motive plays in people's behaviour (Hafer and Begue, 2005). For example, experimental research into just-world theory has repeatedly shown the derogation of victims due to the justice motive. According to research by Callan et al (2007) this also involves negatively appraising a victims' physical appearance. But how likely is it that someone will state that the victim was unattractive, because she was a victim? Even if one was aware of this, social desirability bias would surely prevent one from revealing the motive to third parties? (e.g. Correia et al, 2001).

Secondly there is the function of the justice motive. According to Hafer (2000; see also Hafer et al, 2005) the primary function is that it allows one to invest in long-term goals and to do so according to society's rules for deservingness. Moreover she argued that 'given this function, people should have a greater need to believe in a just world if they have a strong focus on long-term investments and a strong desire to obtain goals through socially acceptable means that society dictates deserve certain positively valued outcomes: The more people need to believe in a just world, the more they should be motivated to preserve a sense of justice in the face of contradictory evidence.' (Hafer and Begue, 2005:44). In addition Dalbert (1999, 2001) suggested that the justice motive helps foster a sense of well-being, overall and in particular in the face of negative life events.

Finally the research into just-world theory shows that the necessity of employing the strategies for maintaining the justice motive increases with the threat an event poses to the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980). In other words the higher the level of injustice, the more people need to take (cognitive, affective or behavioural) action to protect their just world beliefs. In particular both the innocence of a victim and the persistence of his or her suffering are threats to the belief in a just world (see Correia and Vala, 2003). As we will see these features can have perverse consequences. Where we may expect victims who are suffering indefinitely due to crime to be afforded the highest level of sympathy and support, just-world theory predicts negative responses to them to be more rather than less likely. As their suffering is difficult or hard to relieve, the social surroundings will employ strategies that involve

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<sup>5</sup> Which also calls into question whether it is in fact accurate to speak of the need to believe in a just world, as belief refers to a conscious deliberation (Hafer & Begue, 2005).

a negative evaluation of or distancing from the victim to preserve the justice motive. These features may be further compounded by the so-called *severity* effect. This relates to the well-documented research finding that observers pay more attention to the victims' irresponsibility when the negative effect of an action is large rather than when it is minor (e.g., Feigenson et al., 1997). The victim's conduct therefore will be under closer scrutiny in the cases where his or her suffering is largest (see also Adams-Price et al, 2004).

#### *Victim-focused strategies for dealing with injustice*

Lerner's original work mainly addressed the strategies people employ with respect to the victims of injustice (Lerner, 1980). He divided the strategies into rational strategies, irrational strategies and so-called protective strategies.

Rational strategies involve the acceptance of the presence of injustice. These involve either acting to prevent injustice before it occurs and restoring justice to unjust situations, or in other words prevention and compensation. In one of Lerner's first experiments (Lerner and Simmons, 1966) observers watched a fellow student (actually a confederate) take part in a learning task and receive electric shocks for incorrect responses. In the first condition the observers were allowed to reassign the student involved in the task to a reward condition, in the second condition observers were not given this option. Most participants in the first condition decided to reassign the student, suggesting that if people are in the position to compensate victims they will do so. The crux of the experiment however, was that in both conditions the observers were asked to judge the student's character. This was judged to be positive in the first condition, but far less favourably in the second. The student's character was derogated due to his misfortune and the impossibility of undertaking compensatory activities (see also Haynes and Olson, 2006).

Victim derogation is an example of an irrational strategy. In this subset of strategies people preserve the justice motive by refusing to accept the presence of injustice. Lerner described four irrational strategies. Three of them involve reinterpretation of the event. In the first the *cause* is reinterpreted. Here victims are perceived to be (at least in part) to blame for the incident. The distress caused by injustice is diminished or even resolved by maintaining that the victim was also at fault. Victims who are perceived to have a degree of responsibility for their victimization are particularly prone to be blamed (Haynes and Olson, 2006). Victim blaming has been documented in a wide array of situations, such as unemployment, sexual abuse of women and children, battered women, cancer, elderly people, and HIV positive people (see for an overview Haynes and Olson, 2006).

In the second *personal characteristics* of the victim are reinterpreted. I have already noted the tendency for negative appraisals of the victim's character (see Correia et al, 2001; 2003) and their attractiveness (Callan et al, 2007). Castano and Giner-Sorolla (2006) reveal a particular instance of victim derogation in the intergroup context. In their research they provided participants with evidence of mass-killing committed by their own 'in-group' (British and white Americans) against an 'out-

group' (Australian Aborigines and Native Americans). Providing in-group members with this evidence led them to infra-humanize the out-group to a greater degree. Infra-humanization refers to the denial to an individual or group of some of the characteristics that make us human, and in particular of the uniquely human secondary emotions like love, guilt or hope (Leyens et al, 2000). Knowledge of 'our' inhumanities against 'them' therefore leads us to see 'them' as less human.

In the third the *outcome* of the event is revalued. The negative consequences of the event are downplayed and the possible positive consequences of undeserved suffering are stressed, for instance that the victimisation was a learning experience or that it builds character (Hafer and Begue, 2005). This is a topic that has not received much attention in the experiments into just world theory itself, but evidence of this phenomenon is available from a variety of other sources. Bandura (1999) for instance notes the tendency to employ sanitizing euphemisms, like 'alternative career enhancement' for firing people or, in a far more extreme case, the 'Final Solution' for the Holocaust. The reactions of victims to their own suffering also show evidence of this strategy. Zoellner and Maercker's (2006) review of the concept of posttraumatic growth, shows that some victims find that their victimisation has positive consequences in the longer term. It strengthened their bonds with their close ones, made them understand what is important in life. Nevertheless the same review shows post-traumatic growth to have an illusory aspect, in which the attempts of the victims to find something positive in their experience can be viewed as a cognitive effort to avoid the consequences of victimisation.

Finally the observer may employ a strategy of denial/ withdrawal and the related construct of psychological distancing to the event. In denial/ withdrawal the observer attempts to avoid threats to the justice motive when they are encountered (Hafer and Begue, 2005). Psychological distancing involves creating a cognitive distance between oneself and the victim. The observer will attempt to discern cues that the victim is in some way different, so that the injustice that has befallen the victim will be unlikely to happen to the observer (Hafer, 2000).

Psychological distancing is related to the first of Lerner's so-called protective strategies, the 'two world theory' (Lerner, 1980), which may be summarized in the idea that where our world is just, theirs is not (Lerner and Goldberg, 1999; Hafer and Begue, 2005). Research that varies the group-status of victims shows that victims belonging to the same group as the observer pose a stronger threat to the justice motive than out-group members (see Correia et al, 2007; Aguiar et al, 2008). A more extreme form of this is moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990; Clayton and Opotow, 2003) in which the out-group is deemed to be outside the scope of justice. A good example of the consequences of two-world theory and moral exclusion is provided by the research into genocide. Where moral exclusion plays a role in the commission of genocide (see generally Waller, 2006), two-world theory is an explanation for the Western world's apparent indifference to intervene in genocide (see generally Power, 2003).

An additional protective strategy is what Lerner called 'ultimate justice' (Lerner, 1980). Here the justice motive is protected by the notion that although justice might not seem to be done in every instance, it will definitely be done in the long run (e.g. Maes, 1998). Lerner (1997) has connected this

belief in ultimate justice with religion. As Hafer and Begue (2005) note the belief ultimate justice reduces the threat posed by instances of injustice (what Maes calls 'immanent justice'). Consistent with this Lerner (1997) found religious people to show less evidence of victim blaming than non-religious people.

Finally Lerner (1980) proposed a penultimate defence in which people pretend with both themselves and with others that they do not believe in a just world (and probably also that they have no need to hold such a belief).

### *Perpetrator-focused strategies for dealing with injustice*

It is interesting to note that although Lerner was most interested in people's reactions to the victims of injustice, the threat to the justice motive also relates to people's reactions to *perpetrators* of injustice. There is a relative absence of studies that explicitly relate the justice motive to people's reactions to perpetrators of injustice (Hafer and Begue, 2005), but in the collection of essays in honour of Lerner '*The Justice motive in everyday life*' (Ross and Miller, 2002), both Vidmar and Darley connect their research into punishment and retributive justice to the need to believe in a just world (Vidmar, 2002; Darley, 2002). In the same volume Ellard and colleagues discuss the concept of demonizing of offenders within the framework of the justice motive (Ellard et al, 2002). In addition recent research by Wenzel and colleagues concerning retributive justice and other strategies for dealing with perpetrators of injustice shows a strong consistence with the victim-focused strategies discussed by Lerner (e.g. Wenzel et al, 2008, Okimoto et al 2009, Wenzel and Thielmann, 2006).

A central question in the research Darley and his colleagues undertook is why we punish offenders (e.g. Darley et al, 2000; Darley, 2002, Carlsmith et al 2002). And the answer is as Darley himself says 'we punish others who have committed prototypic "crimes" –intentional infliction of wrongful, immoral harms on others- because we wish to give the actor his justly deserved punishment for the wrongful action he took' (Darley, 2002:331). Although this punishment may deter the offender or others from committing acts in the future, neither is the central purpose of punishment. Darley shows the punishment to be proportionate to the magnitude of the wrong committed, rather than its (perceived) effectiveness in the prevention of future offences. This notion of just deserts (e.g. Von Hirsch, 1993) or retribution is consistent with Lerner's theory. We punish in proportion to the threat posed by the offender's action to our need to believe in a just world.

The threat posed by the offender's action is more proportionate to the wrong committed rather than the harm caused. Alter, Kernochian and Darley (2007) showed transgression wrongfulness to outweigh harmfulness in determining sentence severity. Similarly the results of Gromet and Darley (2006; 2009a)'s research reveal the severity of crime to be related to the desire to meet out retributive punishment.

Research by Wenzel and colleagues outlines that an alternative reaction to the perpetrator's actions is what they call *value restoration* (see for an overview Wenzel et al, 2008). Here the injustice



is undone through actions on the part of the offender to repair the harm caused and simultaneously reaffirm his or her commitment to the values breached by the transgression (or in other words through a restorative justice procedure, e.g. Braithwaite, 2002). In cases of lower severity Wenzel et al (2008; see also Gromet and Darley, 2006, 2009a, 2009b) show value restoration alone to be deemed a sufficient reaction by observers, while in high severity cases the value restoration may also be included in the reaction to crime, but only alongside a retributive response.

The importance of value restoration also depends on the question whether or not offender and victim are regarded as sharing membership in a relevant community or inclusive group (Wenzel et al, 2008). The strategy of value restoration applies to in-group perpetrators who are therefore expected to uphold community values, but not to out-group members. Support for value restoration is correlated with group cohesiveness, as this increases people's concern about group values (Wenzel et al., 2009). The ingroup-outgroup divide in reactions to perpetrators maps on to Lerner's protective strategy of the two-world theory. Our world is just, but theirs is not necessarily so.

The severity of the crime and the extent of shared identity interact (Gromet and Darley, 2009a). Severe crimes will lead to an attempt to distance oneself from the offenders and to exclude them from the in-group (see also Eidelman, Silvia, & Biernat, 2006). As Pemberton (2010) notes, crimes of a sufficient severity automatically convey a sense of 'otherness' to the perpetrator. This sense of otherness relates to an earlier notion of Darley that demonizing the offender serves to protect the justice motive (Darley, 1992).

As Ellard et al (2002) note, this may, at first glance, seem somewhat paradoxical. 'After all if evil behaviour is threatening, isn't demonizing just the opposite of what people should do to protect their belief in a just world. Why would people want to populate their just world with evil people? (Ellard et al, 2002: 352). As Ellard et al (2002) point out, however, the alternative, the unfortunately empirically well supported fact that ordinary people commit extremely evil acts,<sup>6</sup> is more disturbing. If anyone can be the author of evilness, it is much harder to maintain a belief in a just world, while believing that evil acts are undertaken by equally evil people makes it more recognizable and controllable. The threat that evil poses to the justice motive is located in individuals, who can be contained or even eradicated. The evildoers become the rare exceptions to the rule that the world is basically a just place. Moreover their humanness is called into question. Perpetrators of evil are dehumanized (Haslam, 2006), by using categories of subhuman creatures (for example, the word predator, relating to animals) or by using categories of negatively evaluated unhuman creatures (as is implied by demonizing) and are thereby morally excluded from the scope of justice (Opotow, 1990).

The research into (the motives behind the) punishment of perpetrators of crime reveals the existence of –Lerner's terms - both rational strategies (retribution, value restoration) and protective strategies (two-world theory, demonizing). Non-rational victim-related strategies, in addition, may

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Waller, 2006. His research convincingly shows that it is ordinary people who commit genocide and mass killing.

implicate offenders as well as victims. The reinterpretation of the cause of the event may reapportion blame between the victim and the offender, although victim blaming may coincide with a severe retributive response toward the offender (see below). Reinterpretation of the outcome, in more positive terms, can also reduce the perception of wrongdoing by the offender.

### *The relative importance of strategies*

Hafer and Begue (2005) note that different just-world strategies may co-occur. People may at once attempt to compensate victims, while they psychologically distance themselves from them. Similarly the urge for retribution may coincide with either the protective strategy of demonizing or attempts to achieve value restoration. In the latter the compensatory strategy focused on the victim is an integral part of the strategy focused on the offender.

As noted throughout this article a variety of factors play a role in the choice of strategy. In the case of the offender the severity of the crime stresses the need for retribution, while shared identity with the offender makes a value restoration strategy more likely. In the case of the victim the possibility of offering compensation is important, with victim derogation and even blaming being more likely in the absence of such possibilities. Similarly failed attempts at compensation or enduring suffering of the victim heighten the need for non-rational strategies in coping with the injustice the victim suffered.

A particularly important issue for victimology is the relative importance of the rational strategies people may employ in the face of injustice. Do they prioritize punishment of offenders over compensation to victims or the other way around? The former rather than the latter appears to be true. The aversion at injustice, the anger or 'moral outrage' this causes (e.g. Miller, 2001; Darley & Pittman, 2003) are easily aligned with a punitive response towards the offender. In dealing with the victim however an observer is faced with two conflicting emotions, with the aversion at the situation sitting uneasily with the sympathy and empathy needed to address the plight of the victim (e.g. Folger & Pugh, 2002). Similarly where increasing severity of crime simply leads to a stronger desire to punish the offender, a similar increase heightens the tension of dealing with victims. As noted earlier, the more a victim suffers, the more likely it is that a non-rational strategy, like victim blaming, derogation or distancing, will be employed. Finally employing the strategy of psychological distancing to victims, will lead people to be relatively indifferent to the victims' needs (Loewenstein and Small, 2007), while people are rarely indifferent about offenders (e.g. Miller, 2001; Hogan and Emblar, 1981; Van Prooijen, 2009).

The predominance of punishment over compensation is borne out by recent research by Van Prooijen, 2009 and Gromet and Darley, 2009. Van Prooijen (2009) showed the impulse to punish the offender to outweigh compensation of the victim in crimes ranging from relatively mild (pick-pocketing) to severe (kidnapping or rape). Gromet and Darley (2009) revealed punishing the offender to be the default reaction to crime, although instructing participants to think about the victims' fate did

increase the importance of 'restorative' options.

## **Victimological concepts and just-world theory**

### *The ideal victim?*

In a seminal and much-quoted publication Nils Christie (1986) coined the term 'ideal victim'. Briefly, he described the ideal victim along the following lines (see also Dignan, 2005):

- The victim is weak in relation to the offender – the 'ideal victim' is likely to be either female, sick, very old or very young (or a combination of these).
- The victim is, if not acting virtuously, then at least going about their legitimate, ordinary everyday business.
- The victim is blameless for what happened.
- The victim is unrelated to and does not know the 'stranger' who has committed the offence.
- The offender is unambiguously big and bad.

According to Christie these 'ideal victims' are those who -when hit by crime – are most readily given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim, with the little old lady being his favourite example (Christie, 1986). They are the deserving victims, the ones that are most likely to receive our sympathy and in whose names victim services are justified (Spalek, 2006). Christie criticised the ideal victim for not adequately reflecting the reality of many instances of crime, as many victims of crime do not share the characteristics of the 'ideal victim'.

Except for its lack of a factual base, the notion of the ideal victim is also supposed to have subsequent negative consequences for the way offenders are viewed and treated. Many authors have noted that the ideal victim figures heavily in the media (e.g. Reiner, 2002) and in populist campaigns for more severe sentences (e.g. Scheingold et al, 1994; Miers, 2007). The concern is that offenders are increasingly seen as 'unambiguously big and bad' - although most of them are not (see also Green, 2007) – *because of* the emphasis on ideal victims. The subsequent punitive turn in punishment and pressure on suspects' and offenders' rights is, at least in part, caused by this stereotype (see also Christie, 2010).

However the research into the justice motive suggests two problematic features of this line of reasoning. First and foremost, viewed through the lens of the justice motive, ideal victims are in fact anything but ideal. They represent a clear challenge to the notion that bad things do not happen to good people. The research into the justice motive suggests that when faced with the injustice suffered by victims, the first inclination of observers is often to review their conduct and character to see whether they are to blame for their misfortune. Moreover, the victim's enduring suffering, will not lead to an ongoing outpouring of support. This is instead likely to run out long before victims have had time to adequately cope with their ordeal.

Evidence is abundant of these phenomena. Miers (2007) for instance notes the importance of blamelessness in the compensation of victims. Where the victim's behaviour contributes to his or her victimization, compensation may be reduced or victims may be ineligible for criminal injuries compensation. Moreover, in the United Kingdom, victims with a history of criminal behaviour of their own are also excluded, with the mere fact that they are 'criminals' themselves conveying a permanent sense of blameworthiness on them.

The phenomenon of secondary victimisation of victims and victim blaming by justice authorities is another case in point. Contrary to what one would expect when viewing the notion of the ideal victim, these phenomena are also well-documented in the case of 'ideal victims'. The experience of co-victims of homicide, even when they are clearly 'ideal victims', is often marred by instances of secondary victimisation (e.g. Spungen, 1998; Armour, 2007). In addition, as predicted by the research into the justice motive, the reaction of their social surroundings is often not one of enduring sympathy and empathy. Instead victims continuing suffering, will lead to strategies of avoidance and distancing (e.g. Doka, 1988).

The mere existence of Victim Support can serve as a final illustration. A large part of Victim Support's work involves measures to reduce secondary victimization and deliver emotional support to victims (see Pemberton, 2009), efforts to fill in the void in the societal reaction to victimization. The necessity of these types of services stems from the fact that people's default reaction to victimization includes blaming victims, and that the victim's suffering often does not elicit (sufficient) sympathy and support from their immediate environment. That we needed an organization to provide 'tea and sympathy' to victims should serve as a lasting reminder of this fact.

A second problematic feature of the ideal victim is its proposed effect on the way the offender is viewed. In Christie's reasoning the deservingness of the ideal victim and the sympathy he or she elicits negatively affects people's perception of the offender. This however sits uneasily with the evidence that the reaction to the offender is predominant in dealing with threats to the justice motive and that in cases of ideal victims, a severe retributive response co-occurs with victim-blaming and derogation.

This point is maybe best illustrated by the description of a different stereotype. In an equally seminal publication as Christie's, which is nevertheless largely ignored in victimological circles, social-psychologist Roy Baumeister described the so-called 'Myth of Pure Evil':

- The offender intentionally inflicted severe harm on the victim.
- This harm was primarily motivated by the wish to harm the victim, merely for the pleasure of doing so. The harm was not inflicted for instrumental reasons, nor was it used reluctantly.
- Evil and evil offenders are so by nature and this nature has a permanent quality.
- The harm is committed by the other, the stranger or even the enemy.
- The victim is innocent and good.

Although Christie's stereotype is obviously similar to Baumeister's, the latter situates the portrayal of

ideal victims squarely as an element of a protective, offender-focused strategy to deal with threats to the justice motive, namely demonizing the offender. The populist campaigns that invoke the ideal victim, therefore are not so much focused on delivering higher levels of support and compensation to the victim, which should be expected if sympathy for the victim was the main driver for action, but instead on more severe sentences to the author of evil, the offender. The ‘idealization’ of the victim is then a *consequence* rather than a *cause* of the way the offender is viewed and the cases where the blameworthiness of victims is not called into question, are those where the offender is perceived as pure evil.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The justice motive in restorative justice theory*

Christie contrasted the stereotype of the ideal victim with what he saw as the reality of victims’ experience, but his own perception of reality proved to be a social construction in itself. Van Dijk (2006) described this ‘ideal victim of restorative justice’ as being ‘free of vengefulness and mentally ready to accept apologies from the offender and to offer forgiveness.’ Pemberton, Winkel and Groenhuijsen (2007:11) similarly consider this ideal victim to be ‘forgiving, not punitive, more interested in compensation than punishment, and symbolic compensation at that, part of the same community as the offender, not afraid of the offender, wanting and capable of full participation in the case.’

The point that I would like to make here is not that this stereotype does not adequately capture the experience of many victims of crime, in particular those suffering the most severe forms of victimization (see already Pemberton et al 2007; Pemberton 2009, 2010). Instead it is relevant to emphasize that the ‘ideal victim of restorative justice’ concurs with the justice motive, in the sense that observers would much prefer victims to act in accordance with Christie’s stereotype. The ideal victim of restorative justice does not suffer indefinitely, is capable in a large extent of dealing with the consequences of their victimization him or herself and his or her needs may be met by the offering of (often symbolic) compensation. These features all reduce the threat posed by injustice. Instead victims suffering indeterminately, for whom the damage has permanent qualities and who are vindictive and vengeful pose an enduring threat to the justice motive. Van Dijk (2006) provides an extensive discussion of the evidence of the negative societal reaction to angry, vengeful victims. Viewed through the lens of the justice motive, the unease caused by these victims is due to the fact that they serve as enduring reminders of injustice and our inability to resolve it. In sum: the justice motive predicts an observer bias for the ‘ideal victim of restorative justice’ and against the retributive, vengeful victim.

Similar evidence of the justice motive’s role in restorative justice theory is provided by another seminal Christie publication. His 1977 article ‘Conflicts as property’ is one of the most widely cited in criminology. Central in this paper is the notion that crime can be redefined as conflict and that

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<sup>7</sup> A good example of this is the treatment of victims of mass terrorism, particular the acts committed by Al Qaeda, see Pemberton, 2011.

conflict represents the represents 'the most interesting property taken away, not the goods originally taken away from the victim, or given back to him.' (Christie 1977; 7). Again this can be viewed in conjuncture with the justice motive. Both notions may be seen as non-rational strategies for dealing with injustice. The event is reinterpreted, from being an unjust crime to a valuable conflict.<sup>8</sup> The positive aspects of the outcome of the event are stressed, in the sense that the conflict has provided possibilities for 'norm-clarification'. The point here is not so much that I find the first notion to be erroneous (Pemberton 2010; see also Duff, 2003), and that the second only applies under certain circumstances (Pemberton 2010; see Wenzel et al, 2008) but that both the re-evaluation of the cause of suffering and the emphasis of positive outcomes can serve to reduce justice-related threat experienced by observers. The unease caused by the fact that bad things happen to good people is decreased by calling into question whether they are in fact bad things.

Taken together: the charge that just world theory offers against Christie's point of view, which resounds in the work of all too many other authors in the field of restorative justice, is that it attempts to resolve the problems in the reaction to crime by (grammatically) reducing or even outright denying the injustice that is inherent to it (see also Pemberton, 2010). This may contribute to easing justice-related threat, but these non-rational strategies are not very conducive to developing a coherent theory of justice.

### *Victim labelling*

Recently Jan van Dijk discussed similar problematic features to the reaction to victimization (see Van Dijk, 2006, 2008) and I have referred to and agreed with a number of his findings throughout this article. His general notion of victims being disempowered, blamed and derogated in the societal reaction to them and the bias against their expression of anger concur with the gist of this article. I may not fully agree with his description of 'treatment-oriented victimology', but I can quite follow the possibility that the ubiquitous overuse of the word trauma in the description of victims may not be in their interest (see also Pemberton, 2008).<sup>9</sup>

In fact Van Dijk's analysis reveals a rather intriguing phenomenon, that a desire for retribution and punishment of crime in the public (see also Carlsmith et al, 2002) may coexist with denunciation of retributive feelings on the part of the victim. In the light of the justice motive this may be explained through the fact that retributive justice may be a strategy for reducing the threat to justice, while the victims desire for retribution or even revenge may serve as a reminder of the enduring nature of this threat. An interesting avenue for experimental research into the justice motive would therefore be to explore whether victims displaying anger leads to similar results as their enduring suffering.

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<sup>8</sup> As is also clear from Christie's catchphrase 'crime does not exist'.

<sup>9</sup> Van Dijk finds treatment-oriented victimology (i. e. the psychological services provided to victims of crime) to portray the image of victims as passive sufferers (Van Dijk, 2006; 18). However a core feature of the most promising cognitive-behavioral techniques for reducing or recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder is in fact combating passivity (e.g. Ehlers and Clark, 2000).

However as to the cause of the phenomena Van Dijk describes and subsequently his solution I find myself at odds with his analysis. According to Van Dijk the core of the problem lies in the word victim itself. Van Dijk's version of victim labelling theory (see also Miers, 1989; Rock, 2004) traces the origin of the word victim to its religious roots (Van Dijk, 2006: 2008). Van Dijk (2006:4) shows that 'the word victim in European and Arab languages originates from an ubiquitous religious ritual, the offering of a sacrifice as part of the worship of a god.' And in the Christian tradition this refers to the figure of Jesus Christ. According to Van Dijk (2008:20) Jesus Christ does not just stand for innocent suffering. His image also stands for meekness and mandatory forgiveness. And subsequently (Van Dijk, 2008:21) 'In the context of Christian culture, victims are challenged to follow in the steps of Christ at the Cross. They are expected to play a healing role in the aftermath of the crime. The label of victim invites them to render a service to the community by relinquishing their natural right to seek vengeance. By labelling them as victims, those affected by crime are forced into a passive role.' He therefore concludes that relinquishing the term victim and/ or uncovering its hidden connotations will serve as a part of the solution to the problems faced by crime victims.

I however am not so optimistic, as the research into the justice motive also predicts the type of reaction to victims that Van Dijk observes. The question then becomes whether, the reactions to victimisation are due to Christian connotations with the term victim or that the latter is better understood as a religious enshrinement of the justice motive.

My reading of the literature leads me to believe that the latter is the case. Just-world effects have also been documented in cases where the word victim is absent (see generally Hafer and Begue, 2005) or even where no words at all are used to describe the victims suffering (Pancer, 1988). Providing a description of the suffering of a person or the event that caused their suffering is sufficient. Similar effects are found in instances of non-criminal injustice (Hafer & Begue, 2005). Blaming or derogating people for their misfortune and attempting to psychologically distance oneself from them is not restricted to those situations for which the victim label is normally used. Similar findings are also observed in job lay-offs or sickness (see e.g. Haynes and Olson, 2006).

There is cross-cultural evidence for the need to believe in a just world (e.g. Furnham, 1993, Pepitone and L'Armand, 1996; see also Lee et al, 1997). Negative reactions to victims are also found in research with non-Western, non-Christian subjects, and there is also evidence that these effects are stronger rather than weaker (f.e. Mori et al, 1995, Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005). Religious subjects are more inclined to employ the ultimate justice strategy - i.e. that justice will be served in the end - and there is evidence that they therefore are less rather than more likely to display many of the negative reactions to victims that Van Dijk perceives (see Spilka, Hood, Honsburger and Gorusch, 2003 and Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren and Dernelle, 2005; for the role of the justice motive in this phenomenon, see Pichon and Saroglou, 2009). Both the cross-cultural evidence and the research findings concerning religious subjects contradict the emphasis on the Christian connotations of the word victim.

This is also true for the evidence of differences within the Christian population. Closed-minded religious subjects, i.e. those adhering to fundamentalism or orthodoxy, are less likely to display helping behaviour (see Jackson and Esses, 1997, 2000), in particular if the suffering person can be considered to belong to a different group (Batson, Anderson and Collins, 2005). While it is hard to see how victim labelling theory would explain these findings, Saroglou (2003) shows both they can be helpfully understood through just-world theory, with fundamentalist religious subjects displaying higher levels of immanent justice, while more open-minded subjects display higher levels of ultimate justice (see also Pichon and Saroglou, 2009).

These research findings form a stark contrast to the importance Van Dijk places on the word used to describe victims and their ordeal. This leads me to suspect that replacing the term 'victim' will not be effective in reducing the negative societal reactions to victims of crime. Using 'survivor' or 'aggrieved party' to describe a person who has suffered injustice will not obscure the threat to the need to believe in a just world that that person poses to observers.

### **The justice motive and improving the plight of victims of crime**

Throughout the article we have seen evidence of victim-blaming being caused by the need to believe in a just world. Lerner's contention that the justice motive is a fundamental human characteristic implies that reducing the extent of victim-blaming in society will be a never-ending uphill battle. Moreover the revelation that victims who are in greatest need of sympathy and support due to their enduring suffering may be withheld it for that same reason is quite unsettling. Those most deserving of our support are only 'ideal' victims if their victimization is invoked in strategies of demonizing the offender.

The justice motive provides equally pessimistic predictions of increasing the relative priority of victim compensation. In dealing with injustice observers first and foremost include strategies in reaction to the perpetrator's behaviour and punishing the offender is people's default reaction to crime and outweighs compensating the victim. However, although retributive responses may be preferred, the victim's own vengefulness will be met with negative reactions, as this serves as a reminder to the injustice the victim suffered. Instead the 'ideal victim of restorative justice' may in fact be the most preferred victim-stereotype.

Replacing the word 'victim' will not be effective in reducing these negative societal reactions to victims. The Mark of Abel is conveyed by the mere fact that the victims suffered injustice, and that this injustice subsequently threatens the need to believe in a just world. The latter delusion is apparently fundamental to the human condition and in my opinion fundamental to the development of victimology as well.



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